

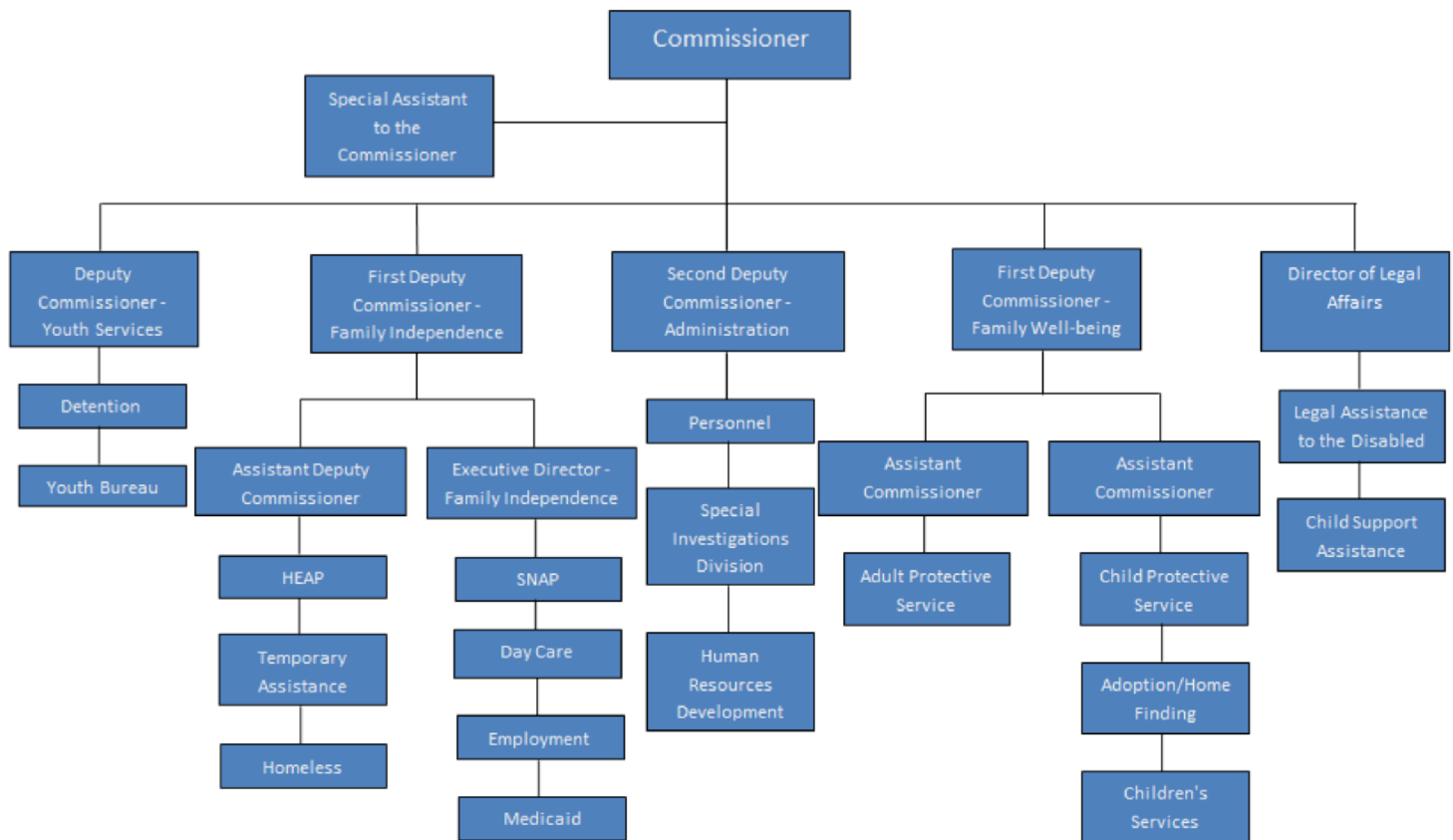


**2017**

**Annual Report**

Erie County  
Department  
of Social Services

**ORGANIZATIONAL CHART**  
**Erie County Department of Social Services**  
*Commissioner's Office*



## ERIE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES VISION

We envision a community where children, adults and families are healthy and safe and enjoy a quality life. As a responsive and efficient organization, we seek to continually engage the community in defining the role of Social Services.

## ERIE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES MISSION

To engage people in need and provide a broad range of efficient and effective assistance and services with community partners to facilitate a brighter future for the people of Erie County.



# contents

- 01 mission and vision
  - 03 commissioner's letter
  - 04 family independence
  - 07 family well-being
  - 11 administration
  - 13 youth services
  - 15 special events
  - 16 special programs
-

The focus of the Erie County Department of Social Services remained on engaging people in need and providing a broad range of efficient and effective assistance and services with community partners to facilitate a brighter future for the people of Erie County.

In 2017, the Department was able to continue many of the initiatives identified in our Strategic Plan:

**Invest in our Employees:** Continued to deploy *solution-focused trauma informed care* training to staff, with a goal of training all staff to improve client outcomes while increasing employee job satisfaction. The Department also expanded the efforts to recognize the good work of our employees.

**Solicit Stakeholder and Community Feedback:** Conducted an internal stakeholder analysis to gain insight on our communications efforts. The Department established a Foster Parent Advisory Board and a Foster Youth Advisory Board to include the voices of our participants in improving our foster care services. We continued to engage our community partners via our Poverty Summit, participated on the John R. Oishei Foundation's community-based Mobile Safety-Net teams, and held several community events and forums.

**Create a Safe and High-Quality Environment:** Completed a renovation of the Erie County Works Center, the entry point for many of our assistance programs. This renovation was able to improve efficiency of the Department and added amenities for individuals and families to improve their experience when entering our facility. The Home Energy Assistance Program and the child welfare programs of the Division of Family Wellness are expected to upgrade their space in 2018 as well.

We will continue to enhance our services to the community, engage in continuous quality improvement, and support our staff and strengthen our community collaborations. The 2017 Annual Reports highlights the work that is being done in the department. We are confident that with our dedicated work force, we begin 2018 on a strong footing. The Department of Social Services team is resilient, strong, capable, and committed to doing what is right for children and families.

Marie A. Cannon, MSW  
Acting Commissioner

# commissioner's letter

## FAMILY INDEPENDENCE

### SNAP

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is designed to assist eligible families to purchase nutritional food. In 2017, SNAP received 39,010 applications for new SNAP cases (average of 3,250 monthly), and issued expedited SNAP benefits to 9,963 households.

The monthly average number of calls answered by the SNAP Call Center was 9,646 in 2017. The average wait time for callers was 69 seconds. The SNAP Call Center processed an average of 218 address changes monthly, or 2,616 annually. Thirty-one SNAP Examiners were promoted or hired in 2017. The SNAP Call Center has assigned one examiner to assist in Reception to answer questions and deal with changes and queries from clients who visit ECDSS in person rather than contacting the Call Center.

In 2017, SNAP received 39,010 applications for new SNAP cases (average of 3,250 monthly), and issued expedited SNAP benefits to 9,963 households.

SNAP continued to work with Food For All, Evergreen Health Services, the Cornell Cooperative Extension, and the Eat Smart NY program, with healthy eating presentations held monthly during the summer, in the SNAP 3<sup>rd</sup> floor reception area, spotlighting the fresh produce available in WNY. SNAP also worked with the Downtown Farmer's Market, and with the Field and Fork organization on the Double Up Food Bucks program. SNAP did outreach presentations at the West Seneca Elder Fair, at ECC, at the Buffalo ALC on Virginia Street, and in East Aurora for the Farmer's Market organization.

Temporary Assistance (TA) is a program of financial assistance to eligible individuals and families. In 2017 Temporary Assistance processed 34,172 applications for:

Safety-Net	9,894
Family Assistance	7,237
Emergency Assistance	13,043
Homeless Services	3,998

Employment Financial Planning (EFP) processed 17,310 applications in 2017 of which 96.77% were processed timely. EFP processed 7,002 SNAP determinations of which 3,057 were expedited.

TA teams maintained an average caseload size of 13,260 open cases [6,116 FA cases, 7,144 SN]. Within their caseload TA maintained a

monthly average of 1,445 children in day care and transitioned average of 364 children a month to transitional day care in 2017. In 2017 TA teams recertified 20,270 cases of which 97.20% were processed timely (prior to expiration date). In April 2017 TA teams rolled out My Workspace and processed 1000+ transactions (111 monthly average).

Temporary Assistance encompasses Photo ID and the Erie County Work Center (ECWC). Photo ID and ECWC are located on the first floor and were a part of the December roll-out of the Nemo-Que queuing system on the first floor of the Rath building which is designed to improve the DSS customer experience and streamline the customer wait time. Photo ID issued 44,014 benefit cards and finger imaged 14,300 individuals in 2017. ECWC maintains the TA 800 information line. In 2017 the information line took 71,417 calls.

### Medicaid

Medicaid is the state and federally funded health insurance program designed to assist low-income individuals and families to obtain medical care for themselves and their children. There are 117,685 individuals receiving Medicaid through ECDSS. This includes General Medicaid, Nursing Home, and SSI Consumers.

The Medicaid Phone Center responded to 72,482 calls in 2017. In order to comply with Federal regulations, a secure electronic Asset Verification System was introduced in the Nursing Home Division. The Medical Utilization Review area is interacting with the state DOH to secure a start date to Pilot processes that will transition disability review responsibility from the local district to the state

In 2018, Medicaid initiated weekly Medicaid backlog reviews to concentrate production to meet the most pressing needs.

A Quality Improvement process was begun to accelerate recovery of overpayments to Managed Care Organizations for individuals who lose Medicaid eligibility. Medicaid began using a ticketing process to track work for the Managed Care area. Due to the completion of an independent analysis of workflow procedures, staffing, and quality control, 4 vacant Social Welfare Examiner positions were filled in Long Term Medicaid, as well as 2 Head Welfare Examiner positions.

### Employment and Day Care

The Comprehensive Employment Division [CED] of the Erie County Department of Social Services provides integrated employment and training services for Temporary Assistance clients and Non-Temporary Assistance SNAP re-





cipients. In addition, services are available for recipients who request services and non-custodial parents of a TANF-eligible child CED provides assessments, job skills training, day care services, substance abuse treatment monitoring, and coordinates Workfare assignments.

The Employment Division Implemented a 'not your average language day' process to reduce the length of time limited English proficient (LEP) clients are scheduled for assessment and provide employment services. As well, the Employment Division Implemented a new process to train incoming Employment Counselor staff.

70% of all employable families were engaged in work preparation activities designed to lead to self-sufficiency. 1,969 Temporary Assistance recipients were placed in unsubsidized or subsidized employment. A total of 1,443 Temporary Assistance cases were closed for excess income through these efforts through August 2017.

The average monthly number of recipients in work experience and job skills training in 2017 was 1,649. The number of work hours contributed to nonprofit agencies by Employment clients in 2017 was 400,788.

Employment Division clients received services from Adult Learning Center, ECC CAST, Goodwill, WNY Independent Living-Peer Connection, Salvation Army, United Way Works, and ECMC. CED began a pilot program in October 2017 with the Buffalo Federation of Neighborhood Centers to provide skill-based office technology training. As well, CED partnered with the Society for the Advancement of Construction-Related Arts, providing the opportunity for 12 clients to learn skills in craftsmanship and construction. The Buffalo Urban League was awarded a contract to administer a youth enhancement program to assist youth with job placement, job retention, and educational achievement.

### **Day Care**

ECDSS provides day care assistance to families earning up to 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level. In addition to day care assistance to working families, the Erie County Department of Social Services also offers day care assistance to participants in Temporary Assistance and Preventive or Protective Services programs. In 2017, the day care assistance programs served a monthly average of 4,739 children.

Workforce Development Institute's (WDI) Child Care Subsidy Facilitated Enrollment Program to expand access to Child Care Subsidy

for Working Families earning up to 275% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). Since the program inception 10/1/16 until 12/31/17, 103 families consisting of 185 children have received day care assistance through the program.

### **PIVOT-Placing Individuals in Vital Opportunities Training**

The Erie County Department of Social Services has implemented a unique wage subsidy program designed to bridge the gap between the local business community and TANF (welfare) recipients. This program provides job opportunities for the employable TANF population while serving as a resource for the hiring needs of local employers. TANF clients are pre-screened for job skills and education then matched with job openings. This reduces the employers' interviewing time. The employer provides clients with any on-the-job training needed and the Department of Social Services continues to provide case management in the form of supportive services such as day care and transportation to support the clients' transition to work. This helps the client transition off welfare to permanent employment and self-sufficiency. Each employer can receive a wage reimbursement for 6 months at 100% of the clients' gross wages. The PIVOT Program works with more than 300 employers throughout Western New York, and 333 Temporary Assistance recipients were placed in subsidized employment through the PIVOT program in 2017.

### **Summer Youth Employment Program**

In 2017, the Erie County Department of Social Services brought our long-running TANF Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) in-house, in partnership with Catholic Charities and the Buffalo Urban League. The eight-week SYEP provided income-eligible youth between the ages of 14 and 20 with paid summer employment starting July 10 and ending September 1. To be eligible, the youth must have a family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

715 youth out of 1300 applicants were selected to participate at a total of 124 worksites throughout Erie County. As part of SYEP, eligible youth worked 20 hours per week in entry level jobs, and earned the state minimum wage of \$9.70 per hour. In total, the program collectively represented over \$1 million in earnings for all youth participants.

Youth participants attended a Job Fair in June to introduce them to the fields of work available through the program. Youth gained experience in various fields of work, including Arts



and Recreation, Community Service, Educational Services, Financial Services, Health Care/Medical, Hospitality/Tourism, Information Technology, Manufacturing, Entertainment, and Real Estate. In addition to work experience, participants received job skills, work readiness, and financial literacy training. An end-of-the-summer recognition event rounded out the program.

### Home Energy Assistance Program

The Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) assists individuals with the cost of heat and energy – related expenses. Eligibility is based on income received by a household during the month in which they apply. Regular benefits assist eligible households with the cost of heat. The Emergency component of HEAP meets emergency heating needs for eligible applicants as well as providing for furnace repair or replacement for client owned homes. The Cooling Assistance component provides for cooling assistance services to HEAP eligible households that include an individual with a

utility or fuel emergencies or other items of need.

**Emergency Assistance to Families (EAF)** provides assistance to families to meet emergency situations that are sudden, not foreseen and beyond their control. Such needs may include but are not limited to, homelessness, fuel needs and utility shut off. The household must include a minor child who is without immediately accessible resources to meet their needs.

**Emergency Safety Net Assistance (E-SNA)** provides assistance to persons not eligible for recurring public assistance benefits, EAA or EAF. The individual or family must present an emergency need and be without immediately available income or resources to meet the emergency. The income standard for ESNA is 125% of the Federal Income Poverty Line.

In 2017, ECDSS provided the following assistance to Erie County households facing an emergency or crisis situation through these programs:

<b>Regular Benefits Issued</b>	81,545
<b>Emergency Benefits Issued</b>	17,872
<b>Furnace Repair/ Replacements</b>	259
<b>Cooling Benefits</b>	637

documented medical condition that is exacerbated by extreme HEAP. The Erie County Department of Social Services assisted more than 90,000 households through the HEAP program last season. Forty-three outreach events were also conducted across Erie County last year as a way to maximize program access and assist households with applying for HEAP benefits.

Regular HEAP Season began November 14, 2016. Emergency HEAP component opened on January 3, 2017. Both ran through March 15, 2017. The Cooling Assistance Program was opened May 1, 2017-August 31, 2017.

### Emergency Services

**Emergency Assistance to Adults (EAA)** provides assistance to individuals in receipt of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) who are facing emergency situations such as homelessness,

<b>Shelter Arrears to prevent eviction</b>	4,068
<b>Moving expenses</b>	1011
<b>Storage expenses (while individual is in temporary housing)</b>	572
<b>Utility Arrears</b>	4,589
<b>Water Shut-off</b>	119
<b>Security Agreements</b>	877

### Domestic Violence

The Erie County Department of Social Services Domestic Violence Team, which operates as an arm of the Temporary Assistance Division, helps to ensure a victims ability to remain safe and access services to move toward self-sufficiency. This may include access to emergency shelter at a secure location.

In 2017, the DV team interviewed 1,486 individuals and provided 1,012 waivers to survivors unable to comply with public benefit eligibility requirements due to the domestic violence experience. This team also worked with 703 individuals facing domestic violence to complete safety plans.

Throughout 2017, DSS contracted with six agencies across Erie County to provide core non-residential domestic violence services including telephone hotline assistance, advocacy, counseling, information and referral services, and community education / outreach activities.

### Homeless Services

The ECDSS Homeless Unit underwent numerous changes in 2017. Upon completion of the first floor renovation in December 2017, this team moved into their new office space in the Rath building. There are now three homeless windows and a separate waiting area with an electronic queuing system to handle intake for individuals seeking temporary housing assistance. The departmental forms underwent a renovation as well. Multiple forms have been created, redesigned and/or computerized to

The Erie County Department of Social Services assisted more than 90,000 households through the HEAP program last season.

“By having a set schedule, I can now plan joint home visits with other agencies who are linked with my client and address any additional needs more thoroughly to help the client. It has also allowed me to build stronger relationships with my client’s collaterals, which in return builds a stronger support system for the client.”

- APS Caseworker

further promote our goal of trauma-sensitive and solution-focused customer service.

In 2017, caseworker staff assigned to the unit was increased with the intention of providing a more comprehensive approach to homeless prevention and a Mental Health Specialist from Endeavor (formerly Mid -Erie) is co-located in the office to provide mental and behavioral health screening and assessment for clients on site in a timely manner.

The ECDSS Homeless Unit made 1,672 Temporary Housing Assistance placements in 2017; 440 families and 1,232 single individuals were provided with emergency shelter and supportive services . DSS shelter placements decreased 18% from the prior year.

During 2017, ECDSS also contracted with three community partners to provide warming shelters, meals and case management services to the homeless when air temperatures are at or below 32 degrees Fahrenheit through the Code Blue initiative. In 2017, we had 88 Code Blue nights: 34 for those nights saw temperatures below 16 degrees, and 54 nights were between 16-32 degrees. On an average Code Blue night, 50+ individuals receive shelter from the cold through this DSS partnership .

## **FAMILY WELL-BEING**

### **Adult Protective Services**

The Adult Protective Services (APS) unit provides a variety of specialized protective services to adults who by condition or circumstance are vulnerable to abuse, neglect, or exploitation. Adult Protective Services received 2,819 new intake reports (an increase of 11% over 2016) of which 1,963 were assigned for assessment (a 22 % increase). APS served as guardian to 52 adults and Representative Payee to 1,166 adults. Currently, APS serves as Guardian to 39 adults. APS continues to collaborate with Center for Elder Law and Justice to secure an alternate guardian resource for additional individuals.

In 2017, APS re-established a Quality Assurance Program for APS that reviews random cases each month and monitors regulatory requirements and quality of services. In addition, APS conducts a peer review of supervisors with open discussion at our supervisory meetings.

APS is part of the Erie County Enhanced Multi-disciplinary Team, a collaboration of agencies that investigate, intervene and prevent financial exploitation of older adults.

This year APS is implementing a new initia-

tive that has several workers completing assessments only and other team members completing the preventive cases. The initiative has provided preventive workers the ability to plan more efficiently as they do not have unexpected assessments. It gives assessors the ability to focus on the safety and risk of current assessments to move these quicker to a determination. Feedback on the initiative is largely positive, with the supervisor and workers stating the following:

“Preventive workers have been able to investigate additional community supports for Clients and transition the Clients out of Protective Services. The Preventive staff have been afforded more time to ensure that Client budgetary needs are being met promptly and accurately. Preventive workers have increased productivity and case planning since they are no longer receiving assessment cases.”

“Assessment workers have been afforded more time to complete their investigations and contact collaterals. As a result Assessment workers have been able to establish more linkages for Clients and complete more thorough investigations, and case determinations.”

“On the preventive side of things, we are now able to focus more on assisting with case management needs and not just assisting with the financial piece. I have a lot of clients who are lacking additional supports and certain benefits (food stamps, Medicaid) and I am now able to assist them with obtaining those benefits.”

“By having a set schedule, I can now plan joint home visits with other agencies who are linked with my client and address any additional needs more thoroughly to help the client. It has also allowed me to build stronger relationships with my client’s collaterals, which in return builds a stronger support system for the client.”

APS looks forward to expanding the number of teams participating in this initiative.

### **Child Protective Services**

2017 was another busy year for Child Protective Service (CPS). In 2017, there were a total of 12,181 reports made to the State Central Registry and investigated by Erie County. These investigations led to 694 children being removed from their birth parent(s) and being placed outside the home. 436 of those children remained with family members or other community and natural resources we could identify through family engagement. The other 258 children entered foster care.

In recognition of the stress and turnover inher-



ent in the work of CPS, the department took steps to increase retention and improve training. CPS continues to look at training and supports to CPS workers to enhance their ability to increase their critical thinking to ensure children's safety as well as providing on going supports to workers dealing with difficult situations. In 2017, a mentoring program was started to link new staff with more seasoned workers, training manuals and curriculum were updated internally, the state implemented changes to the 8 week foundational training, and ongoing brief trainings to enhance skills have been con-



**Child Welfare staff making blankets for children in foster care**

tinuously updated to increase the confidence and success in new staff.

Also in 2017, a Case Load Review system was put in place to increase communication and accountability for feedback and timeframes between supervisory and line staff. Staff also piloted the use of tablets and look forward to the 2018 roll out of the tablets as a tool to help staff in the field. Tablets will provide one central tool for case information, referrals, releases, alerts and real-time communication with supervisors and administration for case progress and monitoring.

#### **After Hours CPS**

In 2017 Erie County DSS gradually took over the CPS After Hours Program. The program was previously contracted out to Child & Family Services (C&FS). After Hours CPS triages any cases that are called in after 4PM Monday through Friday, as well as all cases that come in on Saturday and Sunday until 8AM Monday Morning. The transition was done in phases.

In August 2017, ECDSS assumed responsibility for Saturday, Sunday and Holiday shifts between 8AM – 4PM, while C&FS maintained responsibility for all other times. C&FS covered calls on Saturday, Sunday & Holidays from 4PM

until 8AM the following day. In October 2017, ECDSS assumed responsibility for all days 4PM – 12AM (or 6PM – 4AM). C&FS maintained responsibility for 12AM – 8AM (or another portion of the overnight hours). Finally, in December 2017, ECDSS assumed responsibility for all calls from SCR. Reabsorbing the after-hours work was large task, but the transition was completed by the end of 2017.

After hours staff has handled several serious injury cases as well as fatalities without compromising the integrity of criminal matters and formulated safety plans on those cases. After Hours staff has successfully worked with C&FS in utilizing their emergency foster homes.

After Hours Staff are able to assist daytime staff by completing comprehensive interviews and notes. After Hours staff have covered numerous holidays. This coverage required some “on the fly” thinking by staff as systems failed and back up plans were utilized. Finally, After Hours staff had had well over 200 cases reassigned from daytime and brought to closure.

#### **Children's Services**

In 2017, Children's Services received 853 new cases (703 preventive, 95 foster care, and 55 kinship care), representing 1,884 children. These were new entries to the Children's Services system. As of 12/31/17, Children's Services was servicing 2,121 cases (1,173 preventive, 451 foster care, and 341 kinship care), representing 4,334 children. Our staff is working very hard, and we are very proud of them!

The Fatherhood Connection program initiative was instituted during 2017. Fatherhood Connection founder Reggie Cox, along with Children's Services Caseworker Rolando Gomez and Homefinding Unit Supervisor John Przybyl, meet with fathers or father figures involved in the child welfare system to encourage them to engage more thoroughly in their child(ren)'s lives. A comprehensive group approach that empowers fathers to develop skills in parenting, child development, advocacy, and accessing resources to be successful, it can be a powerful experience for fathers who attend the groups. Rolando reports that it is not unusual to see group participants crying, while learning to deal with their own feelings of loss so they can better parent their sons and daughters. This program has been a powerful addition to our services cadre. The future hope is to have Family Court refer fathers involved in the child welfare system to the program or make it a part of their expected court menu.

Due to retirements and a higher-than-normal

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turnover rate, Children's Services added a third training team and two "step-down" transition teams in 2017. This has allowed us to prepare our workers for the rigors of the job in a graduated manner. We are hopeful that more comprehensive training will assist us in retaining a higher percentage of workers and will help our workers feel confident in their skills.

In 2017, Children's Services concentrated all services cases involving refugee and immigrant families in one unit. This specialization has allowed us to provide culturally sensitive, effective services to newcomer members of our community who are in need of the support of the child welfare system.

Wellness retreats at Beaver Hollow were opened to Children's Services staff in 2017, and our staff members have made good use of this opportunity. The retreats have received rave reviews and have made a positive impact in the lives of our child welfare staff members, who do valiant but very stressful work on a daily basis.

### **Adoption and Specialized Services**

#### **KinGAP Program**

The Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KinGAP) is designed for a foster child to achieve a permanent placement with a relative resource when their parents are not able to care for them. The KinGAP program offers Kinship care gives the opportunity to be a permanent resource for children in their custody, while receiving physical, emotional and financial support when they become a foster parent. Many of the custodians are family members who do not want the parents to lose their parental rights, but want to provide a safe supportive place for the children in their care. Often it is the children who do not want their parent's rights terminated, but understand that their parents cannot safely parent them at this time. The best interest of the children is considered before the KinGAP is approved. It is the input of the caseworker, the attorney for the child, the custodian and the court who make this determination.

The custodians should become a foster parent within 6 months of the child being placed in their care on a 1017 court order. Once they have had the children in their home as a foster child for 6 months they become eligible for the KinGAP program. The KinGAP foster parent will receive financial support at the level of an adoption subsidy. They are also eligible for Medicaid for the children.

In 2017, 15 children were approved for the KinGAP program and processed by our department. All applications are awaiting family

court approval.

### **Homefinding**

There are multiple case types that Homefinding receives on a daily basis. They are:

**Preliminary** – these are cases assigned to Homefinders after a prospective foster parent has sent in an application to become a certified foster parent. These foster homes are used to place children that come into foster care and do not have a relative resource to care for them. In 2017, 31 preliminaries were processed.

**Expedited** – these are referrals to Homefinding made by ECDSS caseworkers who have placed a child(ren) with a family resource. The family resource is requesting to become a certified foster parent. This type of case is growing in numbers as more family resources are sought and identified. In 2017, 75 Expedites have been referred to Homefinding this is almost double from 38 Expedites in 2016.

**Adoption Home Studies** – If children are not able to return home, if the foster parents wish to adopt the child(ren) in their care, an adoption home study is completed as part of the process. In 2017, 35 Adoption Home Studies were completed.

**Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC)** – Homefinding receives requests from the New York State ICPC office who receives referrals from other states requesting the study of a placement resource across state lines. Homefinding will assess the resource for appropriateness and safety of the placement. If a placement occurs, Homefinding will then facilitate a referral for any ongoing supervision requirements. In 2017, 27 ICPC referrals were received.

**Out-Of-Town inquiries** – are requests from other NYS counties requesting similar home studies and services as an ICPC. In 2017, 13 Out-Of-Town inquiries were received.

**Transfers** – foster parents may choose to leave the agency they are currently certified with and request to transfer their boarding certificate to Erie Co. . In 2017, there were 8 Transfer requests from outside agencies received.

When a worker determines that a child may be need of a foster placement (whether initial or a transfer) the worker sends a B98 request for a foster home or placement to Homefinding. 1244 B98 requests were received in Homefinding for 2017. Homefinding also implemented an expedited process for B98's in 2017 and the form and all requests are now processed electronically. The number of homes certified to board children in 2017 was 36, and the num-





ber of placements made through Homefinding for 2017 was 530.

Homefinding completed four Group Preparation and Selection II/Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (GPSII/MAPP). Each group meets for three hours per week for ten weeks (30 hours). This training is part of the process to become a certified foster parent. At least two home consults are scheduled with each prospective foster parent attending GPSII/MAPP.

Homefinding also provides a similar training to prospective foster parents that are unable to attend a regularly scheduled training (i.e. family resource, work schedule, travel). This training is called “Deciding Together” and is usually completed at the prospective foster parent’s home, sometimes after regular work hours.

Homefinding has worked on two innovations during 2017. The first was to make the caseworker referral (B98) process digital. This was done by creating, [placementassistant.erie.gov](http://placementassistant.erie.gov) which is a web-based application that can be accessed on any web browser by Erie County caseworkers. This offers an enhanced way to track referrals, expedites referrals to purchase of service agencies, accessibility to B98’s anywhere a web browser is available, and saves paper.

A second Homefinding innovation implemented in 2017 occurred at the end of the year. Recruitment efforts were analyzed and it was determined that “tabling” at area events may not be the most effective way to recruit new foster parents. The division employed an already used process of recruiting but added to it. As a potential foster parent contacts Homefinding, workers create a log sheet of their call and a Homefinder schedules a home visit to present our orientation discussion. Some callers will prefer to come to our office for orientation and that option is also presented to the potential foster parent. It was shown at 2017’s OCFS Homefinders Summit that striking “while the iron is hot” was a useful way to recruit new foster parents.

Erie County Homefinding continues to work with Baker Victory Services Nelson and Michael

Cottages for emergency foster care placements. The cottages provide a safe home-like setting for children to reside while an appropriate relative placement or foster family match is sought. This program has allowed more time for workers to assess other family members, seek more appropriate resources and keep siblings together.

In 2018, as more family and family-like resources are being utilized to care for their own, Erie County Homefinding plans to present informational and educational sessions in local communities. These efforts will include the local refugee and immigrant communities, aimed at helping these communities to plan and care for their own if intervention by Erie County Social Services is deemed necessary.

### Adoption

Between the two adoption teams there were 140 Adoptions in 2017. This is 29 more adoptions than in 2016, an increase of 26%!

The first adoption team provided services to 185 children in 2017. This figure includes the supervision of the placement of two children who came to live with family from out of state; one was adopted in 2017. Three of the children decided they did not want to be adopted and started working on alternative arrangements and their cases were transferred. 57 children were adopted!

The second team provided services to 183 children in 2017. This figure includes two youth who were discharged from the departments care and placed with Family Caregivers through OPWDD. This figure also includes 83 children who were adopted! 10 of these youth adopted were between the ages of 13 and 18.

Between the two Adoption Units, the department finished the year with 10 caseworkers. There was one new hire in 2017. One worker transferred to another program area in Adoption and another joined our division from that program area, coming back to Adoption after several years. Two workers and their positions were transferred to Children’s Services.

2017 saw improved communication with the Office of Child Support. Regular notice is going to OCSE of the change in legal status of birth parents, particularly of the “fathers” of our children and they are mostly responding with the status of their cases. (If there is no “enforcement”/payment order, cases are closed). Each month OCSE is provided a list of the children adopted the previous month, so billing those parents for support is discontinued.

Between the two adoption teams there were 140 Adoptions in 2017. This is 29 more adoptions than in 2016, an increase of 26%!



Hannah is a sophomore at SUNY Albany and plans on remaining there following graduation to pursue her Master's Degree. She currently maintains a 3.6 GPA and is a member of their Division 1 Track Team.

In June 2017 several workers participated in a training to help deal with cases where the placement disrupts.

The adoption unit participates in Permanency Round Tables (PRT). The PRT meetings are intensive discussions regarding children who currently have no adoption resources or need supports to expedite the permanency process. The process helps to identify barriers and develop action items to identify supports and resources for the child(ren) and any potential adoption resources to find permanency for the child (ren).

The adoption unit also participates in Rapid Permanency Reviews. This project is a collaboration between ECDSS and Casey Family Programs. These reviews take a more in-depth and targeted look at children who have been in foster care for 24 months or longer in order to identify barriers that delay timely permanency for our children and expedite the process.

#### **Independent Living Program**

In 2017, the Independent Living Program (ILP) served 233 youth through Independent Living, WRAP case management, and Daycare case management. The ILP serves young adults who are in foster care up to the age of 21 years old who have a goal of Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA).

Case assistants in the ILP department provided visitation supervision and monitoring for 90 children placed in foster care during 2017.

Success Stories regarding children serviced in the Independent Living Program:

**Hannah** is a sophomore at SUNY Albany and plans on remaining there following graduation to pursue her Master's Degree. She currently maintains a 3.6 GPA and is a member of their Division 1 Track Team.

**Missy** currently lives in a community based Supervised Independent Living Program (apartment program). She successfully completed a summer internship through the NYS Office of Children and Family Services. Missy currently holds two part time jobs and attends ECC City Campus.

**Asia** has been working on improving her coping skills and has developed into a very goal oriented young lady. She recently been reunited with her Aunt and Uncle and they are in the process of taking permanent custody. Asia was also recently reunited with her twin sister who was previously adopted.

**Timothy** has been nominated for the Black History Award offered through the Erie County

Black History Luncheon. Timothy currently works full-time at Wegmans. He is deciding between the armed forces and college for his educational/vocational plan.

The ILP has been working throughout 2017 on increasing their collaboration and continued development of their community partnerships. Examples of Projects/Collaboration to enhance services for our youth:

Family Unification Program (must fit eligibility criteria and be approved by the FUP Committee).

Monthly meetings with agencies to identify challenges, strengths, and incorporation of Solution Focused-Trauma Informed Care principles (Safety, Collaboration, Trustworthiness, Empowerment and Choice).

Ensuring continued efforts to engage identified resources and supports through the use of case planning, Family Group Conferencing, and Family Finding.

Family Court Presentation Lunch and Learn Series "Working with Older Youth in Foster Care."

Collaboration with Emergency Services in an attempt to better serve our homeless youth.

Belmont Collaboration/Attended Homelessness Task Force Meetings

Attended YIP/FOY meetings/Youth Speak Out.

Attended the Heart Gallery to support our youth participants.

Participated in Children's Services Cluster Trainings.

Each worker in the unit is assigned as a lead for agencies (back- ups if necessary) to help with collaboration and consistency.

#### **Services Eligibility Team**

The Services Eligibility Team (SET) determines what source of reimbursement for care we can obtain from State and Federal funding. During a recent audit of 20 cases, no cases were found to fail the audit as there were no errors in the determination of eligibility.

SET has 2 workers who assist eligible Kinship providers in obtaining benefits for the children in their 1017 custody. The workers meet with the custodians either at 478 Main or in the community if the custodian is unable to come to the office. The total number of referrals made in 2017 was 921. Of these referrals, 166 were determined to be ineligible. 646 cases were opened, recertified, or closed.



SET opened 108 cases in 2017 that involved children placed due to juvenile delinquency and Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS) status. SET determines the eligibility and opens the Medicaid cases for children placed in foster care. 459 foster care cases were opened in 2017. 150 Adoption cases were opened during the same time period. 1,471 cases were determined eligible for preventive services.

SET receives referrals from caseworkers and the Social Security Administration regarding children placed in foster care who receive Social Security or SSI benefits. The SET worker determines if Erie County can become the payee for the children who are receiving social security or SSI benefits and can apply those funds to offset the cost of foster care. 240 children were referred to this program in 2017.

## ADMINISTRATION

### Special Investigations Division

The Special Investigations Division (SID) of the Erie County Department of Social Services investigates allegations of actual or potential fraud on the part of public benefits recipients. In 2017, the SID collected a total of \$4.76 million as a result of their investigations. 2017 collections were roughly on a par with 2016 numbers. SID completed 39 prosecutions in 2017, up from 13 in 2016.

Other functions of the Special Investigations Division include the recovery of benefits that are overpaid to recipients of public assistance, and assisting with the burial of indigent Erie County residents. SID imposed 286 successful Administration Disqualifications or prosecutions for TA and SNAP Intentional Program Violations. This figure is up 15% from the prior year. SID identified \$560,000 in burial cost avoidance, the second year in a row where these savings exceeded \$500,000.

SID conducted 3,874 long-term investigations and FEDS investigations, calculated 3,065 TA, SNAP, MA, Day Care and HEAP overpayments, investigated 5,450 Prison and PARIS matches, made 700 burial eligibility decisions, wrote 592 SSI Interim Assistance Reimbursement cases, served 527 summons and complaints, and issued 1,055 income executions. In addition, SID's total collections-related contact via billing related customer phone calls, delinquent letters issued to customers, and face to face collections interviews exceeded 40,000 per year.

SID partnered with NYS Office of Welfare Inspector General and Erie County District Attorney Office to successfully prosecute three home health care aids who were working "off-the books" and fraudulently received a com-

bined \$107,000 in SNAP and Medicaid benefits. As well, SID partnered with the ECDSS Office of Counsel to develop an Administrative Review process for disqualified Day Care providers.

### Human Resource Development Division

In 2017, the Erie County Department of Social Services Human Resource Development Division (HRD) locally developed and delivered 490 trainings with 9,775 attendees. HRD facilitated 3-day monthly Orientation training sessions for 136 new hires in 2017, maintained and enhanced the Orientation Tracking Database and maintained DSS Overview presentation in Captivate. As well, HRD developed "Getting to Know Us" trainings, reaching 231 staff. "Getting To Know Us" will continue in 2018, and will be managed through the orientation division at HRD.

In support of the Solution-focused Trauma Informed Care initiative, HRD created a SF-TIC Database to track staff and sessions. 496 staff have participated in SF-TIC training to date. 224 staff have completed all 4 sections of Foundation Training. HRD developed additional SFTIC related trainings on Soul Injury and the ACE Study, as well as trainings on self-care and resiliency.

HRD presented a HEAP "Boot Camp" to 40 staff



### Getting to Know You—Legal Presentation

in two 2-hour sessions with follow-up onsite tutorials. The HEAP boot camp covered the basics of the computer and work management through Microsoft Outlook. The HEAP Supervisory series involved five deliveries of essential management skills to the nine HEAP Supervisors with continued monthly lunch and learns.

Supervisory Training was delivered in three tracks to approximately 80 supervisors. The first track addresses succession planning. It takes active lists of potential supervisors and

"In 2017, the SID collected a total of \$4.76 million as a result of their investigations."

introduces training to help them prepare for a leadership role. The second track is for brand new supervisors, and includes a welcome from HRD, as well as getting them registered for necessary trainings for their new role. HRD follows their progress, and they receive a certificate and coffee mug when completed. The third track contains topics for seasoned supervisors, to help teach new skills, and help supervisors continue using what they have already learned. A supervisory database tracks groups and staff in program. Finally, HRD developed four deliveries of Succession planning with 37 staff in attendance

HRD maintained and enhanced Critical Incident Tracking database, implemented Bed Bugs Awareness Training, Driver Safety Training, Reception/De-escalation/Safety Training, and Personal Safety Tips training. Child Welfare Monthly Lunch and Learn Sessions included self-care and resiliency in 2017, and in 2018 will include change management; setting boundaries (including transitioning to a supervisor); dealing with difficult behaviors; having the tough talk; emotional intelligence. HRD also facilitated delivery of USDA Mandated SNAP Civil Rights training for 130 TA and SNAP staff. Finally, HRD planned and Implemented a 2017 Health and Wellness Conference Held at Erie Community Downtown Campus. 386 Staff registered for 55 sessions over 3 days. A 2018 Conference is scheduled for June 2018 at the Buffalo Convention Center.

## **YOUTH SERVICES**

### **ECDSS Hosts Juvenile Justice Forum**

The Erie County Department of Social Services partnered with the Erie County Probation Department and the Erie County Family Court to present a community event on Tuesday, September 19, 2017 that opened a community discussion surrounding the juvenile justice system. The open community event took place at the Belle Center at 104 Maryland St in Buffalo and was presented in two sessions.

Attendees included those who represented the juvenile justice system within Erie County as well as community members who have had experience with the system such as parents, caregivers, youth, family, friends, and concerned citizens. Participants were encouraged to share experiences and provide input and suggestions on how the system can be improved.

Light refreshments were provided as a part of the event, and the response from the community was very positive.

### **Detention Staff assist youth in cultivating East Ferry garden**

Erie County Youth services staff are working with youth residing at the East Ferry Street Detention facility to help instill educational values while harvesting crops. Vegetables grown in this way are prepared by the kitchen staff, and participants enjoy the gardening activity.

Joe Lucarelli, Detention Shift Supervisor, has been instrumental in the gardening-cultivation program since its inception about seven years ago. He typically works with four to five youth per evening and provides instruction on watering, weeding, and maintaining the 450 square foot garden. There are 10 to 15 different kinds of vegetables grown from 60 to 80 seedlings. Summer squash, tomatoes, collard greens, beans, cucumbers, peppers, zucchini, and cauliflower are just some of the harvested crops that are cultivated and later prepared by kitchen staff for meals.

“Joe does a great job working with multiple youth, and the youth do ask (Lucarelli) lots of questions,” said Deputy Commissioner of Erie County Youth Services Paul Kubala. “It takes time, but he puts the in to assist. Since the inception of the garden, Joe’s been the most committed person to working on it, and has a real passion for it...A lot of youth are shocked that the veggies come out as nicely as they do. Some look and say “Wow, that’s a big squash!””

Along with Lucarelli, Director of the Erie County Youth Bureau Ben Hilligas has helped in the coordination of resources donated by Grassroots Gardens of Buffalo, a local nonprofit with whom Erie County has partnered for the last three years as part of the initiative. Grassroots Gardens donates the soil, plants, and seedlings as part of the partnership. The coordination process begins in early Spring.

The initiative was originally implemented as part of the Massachusetts Avenue Project’s Growing Green Program aimed at developing and increasing food access, with raised soil beds brought on site. As the initiative grew, Youth staff determined they could largely handle the initiative on their own, with Lucarelli taking the program lead. He began developing a more diverse cultivation program that would plant crops “more advantageous to the facility.” Hilligas also began scheduling youth for participation in the garden.

Kubala describes the garden as “a great educational tool.” “Most of our youth have never even seen a cucumber or other crops that are in the garden,” Kubala said. “They take a big

Erie County Youth services staff are working with youth residing at the East Ferry Street Detention facility to help instill educational values while harvesting crops.

interest in it. It's due to the great work of Joe and Ben, and we do plan on having a bigger, better garden moving forward."

### Summer Primetime Programming

Summer Primetime programming serves youth and families through asset development and advocacy, and through prevention and intervention programs that strengthen families and communities. In 2017, Erie County provided funding to 65 local nonprofit youth-serving organizations to provide summer programs for youth. Program areas included academic enrichment; cultural enrichment including arts, music, and science; career enrichment; youth leadership; community service; and civic engagement.

Just a few of the agencies receiving Summer Primetime funding from Erie County include: ACCESS of WNY; Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Erie County; Boy Scouts Greater Niagara Frontier Council; Boys and Girls Clubs of Buffalo, East Aurora, Eden, Elma/Marilla/Wales, Holland, Orchard Park, and Northtowns; Buffalo center for Arts & technology; Buffalo City Swim Racers; Buffalo Urban League; Child & Adolescent Treatment Services; community Action Organization; Compeer of Greater Buffalo; Computers for Children; Cornell Cooperative Extension of Erie County; Cradle Beach Camp; CRUCIAL Human Services, Inc.; Enlightenment Bookstore; Girl Scouts of WNY; Jericho Road Community Health Center; Jewish Community Health Center; Jewish Community Center; King Urban Life Center; Lackawanna Sports and Education; Lackawanna Youth Bureau; Love Alive Fellowship; Love Alive Fellowship Baptist Church; Massachusetts Avenue Project; Matt Urban Center; and Metro Community Development Corporation (CDC).

Erie County thanks these and all the other participating agencies for bettering the lives of at-risk youth.



### Chef Bobby making a positive difference at EC Youth Detention

Renowned Chef Bobby Anderson, who's cooked at prestigious restaurants locally, nationally and worldwide, also having finished in the Top 5 of a *Hell's Kitchen* TV season with Chef Gordon Ramsey, is happy to give back to his local community, through a collaborative program with Erie County Youth Detention in which Anderson assists youth residents at the center in developing culinary and, ultimately, life skills. The program, coordinated through Erie County's Operation Primetime grant funding, includes Anderson being present on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays at Youth Detention and bringing in unique foods for youths to see and prepare for meals. The program has caught on quickly and is quite popular.

"Word catches on. It's about helping souls," said Anderson, a native of Niagara Falls. "Spirit, strength and hope is what I want the program to bring to the youths. It's offering a unique program, to change their lives, and change their taste buds. "(Cooking) saved my life."

Admitting his own troubled past in which he overcame struggles with addictions, while growing up in poverty, Anderson describes himself as "a kid from the projects," who has carved out a great culinary existence. After washing dishes for several years, he worked his way up to the rank of cook at several restaurants, including E.B. Green's Steakhouse, the Hyatt Regency, Shanghai Red's (now Templeton Landing), and the U.S. Air Force 914th Air Refueling Reserve as a Civilian Chef. He most recently helped establish Hyde Park Steakhouse at the Walden Galleria. In 2008, he finished in fifth place in Ramsey's *Hell's Kitchen* series, and was invited to cook in one of Ramsey's restaurants in England, which he described as a life-changing experience. Ramsey, the most financially successful chef in the world, according to Anderson, provided a compassionate, very helpful shoulder while being "an ambassador of food."

After leaving the show with \$250,000, Anderson started the F-Bites program in Niagara Falls as an after-school initiative in 2009, a program that was expanded to Erie County school districts along with various community and detention centers, including the Niagara County Jail in 2015. Goals of the program are to teach participants both cooking and 'soft skills' they can use to obtain jobs. Anderson volunteered at Police Athletic League (PAL) events in Erie County, and Erie County Youth Bureau Director Ben Hilligas saw him at a show, and a relationship was in large part then established between Anderson and Erie County.

"Word catches on. It's about helping souls."

- Chef Bobby Anderson



Many of the bonds established between Anderson and residents at the Detention Center result in productive career-building for the youths, as Anderson writes letters of reference for those who positively use the culinary experience to better themselves. He sees many residents who go on to work at department stores and other sites, after they are released, who thank Anderson for his contributions to their lives.

"You can always figure life out while having some money in your pocket," said Anderson. "(The culinary program) serves as a pipeline to (job skills and placement). I always say food is the only business in which you can have a (troubled) past and become a vice president or executive, and you can get a hospitality job."

Anderson has now implemented F-Bites as a culinary program in Erie, Niagara and Orleans counties, with more than a dozen related initiatives per each county. Every resident at the detention center is described as having a place in the kitchen, whether it's using a griddle or stove accessories, whipping up toppings or other ingredients, or performing other cooking duties, before showing their finished dishes to Anderson for approval. Anderson then shows residents the proper way to assemble plates and other utensils. Both Youth Services staff and residents have spoken positively about the program, with Chef Leo Zanca working with Anderson.

"(The F-Bites program) offers youth at Secure Detention hope and encouragement, which is an emphasis and focus of all our efforts here," said Paul Kubala, Deputy Commissioner of EC Youth Services.

#### **SPECIAL EVENTS**

##### **2017 Permanency Summit**

A Year of Permanency: A Year of Success for Children Summit was held on April 25, sponsored by the Casey Family Programs. Casey staff assisted Erie County Department of Social Services staff with the planning of the Summit. The purpose of the Summit was to engage community partners and stakeholders in the Rapid Permanency Review initiative, among others, and to gather information from attendees to assist with improving the Child Welfare System.

Area political representatives, judges, ECDSS administration and Casey staff made remarks. A history and context for change was reviewed to lay the framework for efforts and interest to design change focused on permanency, the challenges, and how Erie County can lead change through its Year of Permanency and

subsequent years of practice. A presentation was also conducted on the current state of Erie County to offer insight and understanding of the current state of children and youth involved with the Child Welfare System. In addition to presentations and key note speakers, a panel discussion with youth, families and community partners took place and was designed to gain insight from individuals and families who have had direct experience and interaction with the child welfare system.

There were two interactive activities throughout the Summit: Small table discussions designed to identify "statements of hope" to advance permanency for children and youth in Erie County, and guided community discussion in the round on four topic questions. Feedback from participants was very favorable and reflected a better understanding of efforts to achieve permanency for children, and optimism for improved future outcomes became evident.

##### **2017 Poverty Summit**

Erie County Executive Mark C. Poloncarz, the Erie County Poverty Committee, and the Erie County Department of Social Services presented the Erie County Poverty Summit on August 24, 2017 at the Buffalo Niagara Convention Center. The Summit featured a day of presentations and panel discussions focusing on poverty and its effects on a wide range of Erie County residents as well as ways to promote change across the community. Attendees examined poverty's challenges and effects on children and families, seniors, people with disabilities, and new Americans; and the supports and services necessary to help these individuals escape poverty and enjoy a better quality of life.

"Despite gains in our economy and an unemployment rate that remains low, poverty remains a persistent drain on our community that still hinders individuals from achieving their true potential, especially our children and our seniors," said Erie County Executive Mark C. Poloncarz. "The Poverty Summit brought together a wide cross-section of community leaders to discuss ongoing challenges and explore ways to help residents overcome those challenges and lead healthy, productive lives in Erie County."

Following an Invocation and the Pledge of Allegiance, the 2017 Poverty Summit began with opening remarks from Erie County Executive Mark C. Poloncarz and Chair of the Erie County Poverty Committee Rev. Kinzer Pointer. The Summit's morning sessions included an update on Medicaid usage in Erie County to provide

## **PERMANENCY SUMMIT**

**A YEAR OF  
PERMANENCY  
A YEAR OF  
SUCCESS FOR  
CHILDREN**

**APRIL 25, 2017**



insights into how many county residents are in or near poverty. This presentation was followed by an update on the Buffalo Empire State Poverty Reduction Initiative, a collaboration between Erie County, the City of Buffalo, New York State, and the United Way working to expand economic opportunity for Buffalo residents. The morning also included a panel discussion focusing on the challenges experts see in helping women and children experiencing poverty; a separate panel discussion examining poverty-related challenges affecting Erie County's new Americans; and a discussion focused on the unique challenges facing the county's impoverished seniors and people with disabilities.

Sessions after lunch centered on narratives for change and included breakout discussions on helping seniors live healthy, independent lives; helping immigrants and refugees thrive in their new community; and helping children and families escape poverty, among other topics.

The purpose of the 2017 Erie County Poverty Summit was to engage those from the local community in discussion on ways of further addressing the issue of poverty in Erie County. The Summit proved to be extremely well received by the public, and follow-up events are in motion.

### **2017 Erie County Poverty Forum**

The Erie County Poverty Committee held a Poverty Forum on December 15, 2017 at Hayes Hall on the UB South Campus. The purpose of the Poverty Forum was to release the 2017 Erie County Poverty Committee Report of Recommendations.

The Erie County Poverty Committee is chaired by the Reverend Kinzer Pointer, pastor of Agape Fellowship Baptist Church. Other members include Dr. Henry Louis Taylor, founding director of the Center for Urban Studies at the University at Buffalo; Anna Falicov, Esq., Assistant Corporation Counsel for the City of Buffalo; Dr. Myron Glick, MD, chief medical officer of Jericho Road Community Health Center; the Reverend Frank Cerny, board chair of the Rural Outreach Center in East Aurora; Dr. Yvonne S. Minor-Ragan, President & CEO at YMRagan Consulting, LLC; and Marlies A. Wesolowski, executive director of the Lt. Col. Matt Urban Human Services Center in Buffalo.

"The Erie County Poverty Committee is concerned that the conditions that our fellow citizens are living under are deteriorating and that we could, with minimal effort, improve those conditions," says Rev. Kinzer M. Pointer, Committee Chairman. "We look forward to the Fo-

rum as an opportunity to share our findings, highlight our recommendations, and inspire each citizen to action for a better Erie County community."

This free event introduced the recommendations of the Erie County Poverty Committee which have been developed during 2017. Each member of the Committee presented on topics within the report such as Rural Poverty, Employment, Early Childhood Education, Housing & Neighborhood Development, and Public Health. The Committee members entertained questions from the engaged and interested audience. The 2018 work of the Poverty Committee will engage those members of the community who attended the Forum and expressed interest in their ongoing program of work.

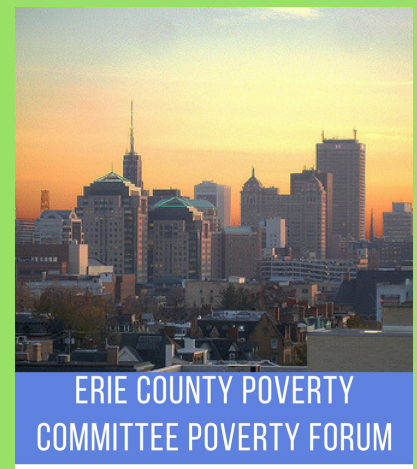
### **SPECIAL PROGRAMS**

#### **ECDSS UB MSW Internship Program**

Erie County Department of Social Services collaborated in 2017 for the third year with University at Buffalo Masters of Social Work to offer internships for graduate students. Ten students were selected to participate. The students completed three weeks of training on Erie County Department of Social Services programs and services. After this initial training, the students were assigned to community organizations and library branches throughout Erie County. Interns were asked to assist community members with questions about ECDSS benefits and services, with special attention to those who experienced transportation and technology obstacles. In addition to assisting individuals in community settings, many of the interns are paired with workers from the Child Protective Service division to shadow and observe. ECDSS is grateful to the following community partners for housing the MSW students and assisting them in their endeavors: Literacy NY Buffalo, ACCESS of WNY, Rural Outreach Center, Matt Urban Center, Anna Reinstein Library, Concord Public Library, Akron Newstead Public Library, Kenmore Public Library, New Covenant Food Pantry, and Community Concern of Evans.

#### **SACRA graduation highlights success of ECDSS PIVOT program**

Learning the skills necessary for job placement, particularly in the field of craftsmanship and construction, is an integral part of what 12 individuals from the Erie County Department of Social Services' Placing Individuals in Vital Opportunity Training (PIVOT) program obtained during their participation in the Society of the Advancement of the Construction-Related Arts



Local craftsmen, artists, contractors and industry professionals taught SACRA program participants skills during the 15 weeks, exposing students to various types of craftsmanship, a variety of occupations, and teamwork skills.



### SACRA Program 1st Graduating Class—January 2017

(SACRA) program. The 15-week program, which culminated with the January 10 graduation ceremony, included two main goals of SACRA: creating teaching and learning opportunities where exceptional quality of imagination in design and construction are encouraged; and teaching the necessary skills for employment in the fields of carpentry and wood-working.

SACRA is a partnership between the Albright-Knox Innovation Lab and local artist/University at Buffalo professor of architecture Dennis Maher, for the purpose of promoting neighborhood stabilization and preservation, as well as workforce training in WNY. ECDSS served as a recruiter for program participants, with a dozen Temporary Assistance recipients in the PIVOT program being trained at Assembly House 150.

At graduation, the participants received a Certificate of Completion from the Buffalo Public Schools, and had an opportunity to display their completed projects that included tool boxes, a vertical tiered planter ladder, bread box, and dog house. Local craftsmen, artists, contractors and industry professionals taught SACRA program participants skills during the 15 weeks, exposing students to various types of craftsmanship, a variety of occupations, and teamwork skills.

Guest instructors were on hand from various sites such as the Roycroft Campus and Darwin Martin House, and trainees went on numerous field trips including excursions to Delaware Park, Hadley Exhibits and the Darwin Martin House.

In addition to its recruitment of program participants, ECDSS also worked with Buffalo Pub-

lic Schools Adult Education to ensure participants had the individualized life skills, coaching and support necessary to succeed in the workforce. As a result of the group's accomplishments, four of the PIVOT participants in SACRA received job placement following graduation.

ECDSS congratulates PIVOT staff and participants for successfully arranging and learning job skills necessary for employment, and thanks our community partners for their involvement in this and other programs aimed at bettering the lives of those in our local community.

### Mobile Safety-Net Initiative

The Mobile Safety-Net Initiative was established in 2009 by the John R. Oishei Foundation to deal with the rise of poverty in Western New York. The Great Recession left many out of work and unable to find new employment. As well, the face of poverty wasn't only an urban one – many in suburban areas experienced the effects of the economic downturn. Suburban and rural poverty is challenging in that many support services are offered in urban areas but are not easily accessible by suburban and rural families in need. As well, the economic downturn challenged all community based agencies to do more with less - to assist those in need with fewer resources.

In 2012, twelve communities began meeting regularly to assess the specific needs of target communities. The groups which developed in the Erie County communities were each appointed a representative from the Erie County Department of Social Services senior staff. ECDSS representatives are able to assist with initiatives in the hardest-hit areas of the County. In 2017, ECDSS participated in regular com-

munity HUBs in Cheektowaga, Lackawanna, Town of Tonawanda, and Kenmore. In addition, staff assisted with planned initiatives in Akron and Springville. In addition to the opportunity to offer assistance with HUBs and initiatives, the Mobile Safety-Net program also brings together providers of community services and encourages the development of strong relationships and collaborative efforts to assist our community members in need.

### **SFTIC Initiatives**

The Erie County Department of Social Services is actively implementing Solution-Focused Trauma Informed Care into its workplace. As part of ECDSS' mission to put into action the five principals of Trauma Informed Care - Safety, Trustworthiness, Choice, Collaboration, and Empowerment – the administration of ECDSS, its SFTIC Champions, and other committees are developing ways to make SFTIC more visible to staff.

New hires are introduced to SFTIC during Orientation, which 15 to 20 minutes devoted Human Resource Development to explaining the importance of and need for SFTIC in Erie County.

All staff take SFTIC Foundation Training, instructed by Denise Krause and Susan Green of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Foundation Training consists of two seven-hour sessions and two one and one-half hour sessions. The instructors introduce the role of trauma in influencing life outcomes and subsequent behavior. Participants learn to ask "what happened to him/her?" rather than "what is wrong with him/her?" As well, participants become aware of the genesis and consequences of secondary trauma on Social Services employees.

Additional awareness of SFTIC is promoted with signage throughout ECDSS office buildings and on ECDSS computer desktops. The goal of the introduction of SFTIC principals into our work is to improve the lives of both staff and clients.

### **Language Access Plan**

In 2017, The Department of Social Services recommitted itself to providing competent language assistance at no cost and in a timely manner to people with limited English proficiency with the creation of its *Language Access & Compliance Plan*. Over the course of 2018, Social Services will be changing its operations and training staff to meet the points this plan, ensuring meaningful access and an equal opportunity to participate in the services, activities, programs, and other benefits administered by ECDSS.

By the end of 2018 the Department of Social Services plans to be able to offer translated program materials in ten languages covering nearly 90% of limited English proficient clients. In addition, ECDSS plans to recruit bi-lingual staff members to serve our larger communities, as well as offer translators and interpreters for both incoming and outgoing calls, as well as in-person interviews, to members of the public with limited English proficiency. This plan is an important change to ECDSS operations that will undergo yearly audits by administration to ensure the highest quality of customer service is offered to the public.

### **Rath Building Renovations**

Recently completed renovations to the first floor of the Rath Building are designed to provide more efficient services to those applying for assistance from the Erie County Department of Social Services. The floor houses the Homeless Unit, Photo ID, and the Erie County Work Center.

Roughly 11,500 square feet was renovated, modernized, and reconfigured to provide better services in a more secure, respectful, and welcoming environment, along with improved work spaces for staff. Additionally, the new design and renovations support a Solution Focused Trauma Informed Care (SF-TIC) approach to providing services. Completed work from the Pearl Street front door in the Public Benefits area allows the Homeless unit to return to the first floor after being housed temporarily on the third floor; with the bathrooms renovated and updated, a baby changing room and play area implemented in the public space, and cell phone charging area installed for public use. Department employees were provided refreshed, expanded work spaces, and security has been enhanced with magnetometers and new security cameras. A new HVAC system was installed for climate control.

Renovation of the reception area provides better public access and an aesthetically pleasing layout, with new lighting, flooring, seating, and color scheme. A new queueing scheme is also in place to expedite visitor's time in the office and reduce waiting time in reception. A first-floor kiosk provides a self-service queueing option for clients, a means of bypassing the initial information line. Once an individual enters the building and is cleared by Security, they can check in at the kiosk, which offers both English and Spanish language options. The next step includes an applicant clicking on one of the following first-floor options: Work Center/Application, Homeless or Benefit Card/PIN. A ticket displaying the window area number to

"The new design and renovations at the Rath Building support a Solution Focused Trauma Informed Care (SF-TIC) approach to providing services."



time, is then printed for the visitor.

The Erie County Work Center (ECWC), the designated area for accessing public benefits, is where the public can obtain applications for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Safety Net programs, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Medicaid enrollment information. Applications are screened for eligibility for public benefits at one of the six remodeled window stations available. Applications are screened for eligibility for public benefits at one of the six remodeled window stations available. Community members in need of homeless services will now be serviced in a newly remodeled space dedicated to the program, and customers in need of new or replacement Common Identification Benefit Cards to access their public benefits will now be served on the first floor. Photo ID was previously located on the fourth floor of the Rath Building. Approximately 13,400 customers utilize the ECWC each month.

